

BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6353  
FRED BROWN/NEW DELHI

DECEMBER 28, 1978

BANGLADESH POLITICAL SITUATION

ANNCR:

IN BANGLADESH, LONG PROMISED PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS HAVE AGAIN BEEN PUT OFF, THIS TIME BY TWO ADDITIONAL WEEKS. FROM OUR SOUTH ASIA BUREAU, CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN SENT THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE ELECTIONS ORIGINALLY WERE PROMISED FOR THIS DECEMBER BUT WERE DELAYED UNTIL JANUARY TWENTY-SEVENTH TO PERMIT RE-ADJUSTMENT OF ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES. THE NEW POSTPONMENT, UNTIL FEBRUARY TWELVETH, WAS ANNOUNCED EARLIER THIS WEEK BY PRESIDENT ZIA RAHMAN. PRESIDENT ZIA SAID THE ADDITIONAL DELAY HAD BEEN REQUESTED BY POLITICAL LEADERS WHO WANTED MORE TIME TO PREPARE FOR THE ELECTIONS. SOME POLITICAL COMMENTATORS HAD SUGGESTED THAT THE PRESIDENT MAY ALSO HAVE WANTED MORE TIME TO PERSUADE SOME OPPOSITION LEADERS TO CALL OFF PLANS FOR A BOYCOTT OF THE ELECTIONS. WITHOUT THE PARTICIPATION OF SUCH IMPORTANT GROUPS AS THE BANGLADESH AWAMI LEAGUE, THE PARTY OF THE LATE SHEIK MUJIB UR RAHMAN, THE ELECTIONS MAY LACK CREDIBILITY.

A TEN-PARTY ALLIANCE OF OPPOSITION GROUPS THAT INCLUDES THE AWAMI LEAGUE HAS SAID IT WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE POLLS ONLY IF THE PRESIDENT AGREES TO A LIST OF DEMANDS. CHIEF AMONG THESE ARE AN END TO MARTIAL LAW AND RECOGNITION OF THE SUPREMACY OF THE PARLIAMENT. THE ALLIANCE WANTS REPEAL OF A NINETEEN SEVENTY-FOUR CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT THAT ALLOWED SHEIK MUJIB TO ESTABLISH A PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM AND ONE-PARTY RULE IN THE COUNTRY.

IN HIS ADDRESS TO THE NATION EARLIER THIS WEEK, PRESIDENT ZIA INSISTED THAT THE COMING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS WILL BE AN IMPORTANT STEP TOWARD RETURNING BANGLADESH TO DEMOCRATIC RULE. HE POINTED OUT THAT MARTIAL LAW REGULATIONS HAD BEEN RELAXED TO PERMIT OPEN POLITICAL ACTIVITY, AND HE PROMISED THAT MARTIAL LAW WILL BE LIFTED ALTOGETHER ONCE THE NEW PARLIAMENT IS FUNCTIONING. HE ALSO ANNOUNCED AN END TO RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIL LIBERTIES THAT HAD BEEN IMPOSED IN NINETEEN SEVENTY-FOUR. HE SAID ALL REMAINING POLITICAL PRISONERS MAY SOON BE FREED.

HOWEVER, PRESIDENT ZIA WAS ADAMANT ON ONE POINT -- HE CONTENDED THE PEOPLE HAD CLEARLY SHOWN THEIR PREFERENCE FOR A PRESIDENTIAL FORM OF GOVERNMENT, WHEN THEY OVERWHELMINGLY ELECTED HIM AS PRESIDENT LAST JUNE, AND HIS SPEECH CONTAINED A VEILED WARNING TO THE RECALCITRANT POLITICAL LEADERS. HE CHARGED THAT SOME POLITICAL FORCES IN THE COUNTRY DO NOT BELIEVE IN DEMOCRACY AND ARE TRYING TO PREVENT ITS RESTORATION. UNDER A DECREE SIGNED LAST MONTH, THE PRESIDENT HAS THE AUTHORITY TO BAN ANY POLITICAL PARTIES DEEMED TO BE UNDER FOREIGN INFLUENCE. SOME COMMENTATORS HAVE SUGGESTED THIS MIGHT INCLUDE THE AWAMI LEAGUE WHICH, IN THE PAST, HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF HAVING CLOSE TIES WITH INDIA.

GH/RCS